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ABSTRACT

Despite numerous special problems, urban schools are attempting to develop programs to meet the needs of homeless children. National estimates of the number of homeless school-age children range as high as 440,000, at least one-half of whom do not attend school. The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 includes a section that addresses the educational needs of homeless children. Its provisions revise school residency and guardianship laws and require states to develop plans to assure that homeless children are provided the same services as other students. The following educational problems are most frequently cited: (1) transportation to and from school; (2) prompt transfer of student records from school to school; (3) incomplete or missing health records; (4) difficulty in assessing the needs of transient homeless students; (5) unavailability of a proper home study environment; (6) low parent involvement; (7) lack of community services to support attendance; and (8) emotional and socialization problems. The following programs could be provided given adequate funding and support: (1) school-shelter liaisons; (2) after school and extended day programs; (3) special tutoring programs; (4) preschool problems; (5) in-school social workers and counselors; and (6) in-service teacher training. A list of six references is appended. (FMW)

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Educating Homeless Children

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by Amy Stuart Wells

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EDUCATING HOMELESS CHILDREN

Introduction

Until the 1980s, the American homeless population was comprised mainly of older males. Today, homelessness strikes much younger segments of the society. In fact, a 25-city survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors in 1987 found that families with children constitute the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (House of Representatives, 1987). Many homeless children are clustered in inner cities; this transient and frequently frightened student population creates additional problems - both legal and educational - for already overburdened urban school administrators and teachers.

Demographics of Homeless School-Age Children

Estimates of the total number of homeless Americans range from 350,000 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1986) to 3 million (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987). Likewise, estimates of the number of homeless school-age children vary radically (Children's Defense Fund, 1988). A U.S. Department of Education (DOE) report, based on state estimates, asserts that there are 220,000 homeless school-age children, about one-third of whom do not attend school on a regular basis (1989). But, the National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that there at least two times as many homeless children, and that less than half of them attend school regularly (CDF, 1988).

One segment the homeless children population that is particularly difficult to count consists of the "throwaway" youths, who have been cast out of their homes. The Elementary School Center in New York estimates that there are 1.5 million of them, many of whom are not counted as children because they do not stay in the family shelters and tend to live by themselves on the streets.

The five cities with the greatest number of homeless children are Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, the Minneapolis metropolitan area, and Houston (DOE, 1989)—cities whose education systems are also taxed heavily by the needs of the other inner city students they serve.

Education Provisions of the McKinney Act

The Federal law, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, includes a section that addresses the educational needs of homeless children.

The education provisions of the McKinney Act are premised on the beliefs that: all homeless children have the right to a free, appropriate education; and state and local laws and regulations must be revised, if necessary, to assure that homeless children are not denied this right.

The laws that most frequently need to be revised at the state and local level are school residency laws. Under the McKinney Act, schools can no longer deny access to homeless students without proof of residency within the school's zone. In addition, rules regarding guardianship must be waived for homeless students living with foster parents or relatives other than their legal guardians.

The Act instituted a two-year Federal grant program calling for each state department of education to establish an office of the Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The coordinator is responsible for gathering statewide data for the U.S. Department of Education on the number and school attendance rates of homeless children, and for writing state plans for educating these children.

These state plans must include at least the following provisions:

- procedures for resolving disputes regarding education placements of homeless students;
- authorization for state and local agencies to make determinations required in all components of the plan; and
- assurance that local educational agencies will accommodate students "in keeping with the best interest of the child," rather than on the basis of administrative convenience or cost (Bowen, Purrington, Layton, & O'Brien, 1989).

This third component of the state plans provides homeless parents and students with two options for school selection: 1) continuance at the school of origin; or 2) the student can transfer to the school nearest the temporary shelter. In most cases, it is up to the student's school district to provide transportation from the shelter or hotel to the school.

In addition, the state plans must assure that homeless children are provided with the same services as other students in the school and that local school officials must maintain appropriate records on each homeless child (Bowen et al., 1989).

Problems Facing Local Educators

Given the mandates of the McKinney Act and the requirements of the new state plans, local education officials must devise methods of overcoming the various problems that arise in providing services for homeless children. The following list, derived from the U.S. Department of Education report (1989) and ERIC/CUE interviews with educators and homeless advocates,

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documents the most frequently cited educational problems of homeless children:

- Transporting homeless students, many of whom change shelters often, to and from school can be complicated.
- School records are rarely transferred from school to school promptly because parents are often embarrassed to inform schools that they are homeless. Without records, new teachers must invest extra time in assessing achievement levels.
- Health records, especially for those families who lost their homes in fires or who are fleeing from an abusive spouse, are rarely intact. Although many state laws previously mandated that children could not attend school without their immunization records, local educators are forced to become more lenient. Homeless children may end up having to be reimmunized.
- As students move from shelter to shelter and school to school, they never stay in one place long enough for teachers to assess their special needs.
- Homeless students rarely have the space or the peace and quiet for homework. Shelters are often large, noisy one-room barracks-like structures with no privacy. Students living in hotels often share one small room with their entire family.
- Education is not a top priority of homeless families, as parents are preoccupied with finding food, safe shelter, and employment.
- General lack of community services for homeless families, including health and mental health care, as well as day care for school-age mothers, makes regular school attendance impossible.
- Emotional and socialization problems are common consequences of homelessness. Many homeless students are under severe stress and act depressed or aggressive. Students are often embarrassed to tell anyone at school about their lifestyles and therefore have a difficult time socializing with peers.

Solutions to Problems of Educating Homeless Children

Despite the lack of agreement on how local educators should help meet the needs of homeless children and youth, several innovative and helpful programs are in place around the country. Given adequate funds and support, educators say they could provide the following programs for their homeless families:

- *School-shelter liaisons*, or district employees who meet with families as they move into temporary housing and assist in getting students enrolled in the nearest schools. Examples of such efforts are found in Newark, Cleveland, and certain school districts in New York City. These district employees can also arrange transportation for students who choose to remain at their original school. And for those students who transfer from their schools of origin, liaisons can help obtain academic records quickly. They also help to assure that students who leave the shelters and hotels are enrolled in new school.
- *After-school and extended day programs* to provide homeless students with a quiet place to do homework or participate in recreational activities.
- *Special tutoring programs* for homeless students, especially those who have missed a great deal of school.
- *Pre-school programs* for homeless children.
- *Workshops for parents* on how to find housing and jobs.
- *In-school social workers and counselors*, who can help with everything from academic counseling to clothes drives for homeless families.
- *In-service training programs* to help raise the awareness and sensitivity of school personnel to the problems and daily trials these students face.

While educators realize that such programs will not solve the most crucial problem for homeless children—the lack of a safe, warm place to call home—they contend that such programs and services will help schools meet the requirements of the McKinney Act as they help children survive during a time of great stress and turmoil.

—Amy Stuart Wells

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